
Rural Alaska Mentoring Project (RAMP)

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For over two years the National Dropout Prevention Center (NDPC) at Clemson University has been supporting the Lower Kuskokwim School District (LKSD) in NW Alaska with their efforts to reduce high school dropout in 23 remote Yup'ik Eskimo villages. One of Alaska's largest rural districts, LKSD services a 22,000 square mile area roughly the size of the state of West Virginia. Approximately 3,900 students (K-12) of mostly Yup'ik (Eskimo) heritage are served by the district's 345 teachers and numerous paraprofessionals. One-fifth of the certified teachers are Yup'ik, the greatest percentage of indigenous educators of any district in Alaska.

The Rural Alaska Mentoring Project (RAMP) provides school-based E-mentoring services to 164 high-needs students in grades 4 through 8 in Alaska's most remote schools, with a special focus on high-needs students who are at the greatest risk of dropping out of school. The E-mentoring program is run through the District's Social Work Department, which is led by Patty McMillin, LMSW, Lead Social Worker. Megan Crow, School-based Social Worker at Bethel High School, is the day-to-day coordinator of the program. Dr. Terry Cash, Assistant Director at the NDPC, provided start-up technical assistance and training to the program staff and has maintained a regular on-site presence in support of the program's goals and objectives.

Traveling to and from the villages is quite a challenge. Often the weather window for air travel in a small airplane is limited, and riding 40 or more miles by snow machine in sub-zero temperatures is dangerous. A major method of transportation in winter includes driving a car or snow machine on the river when it freezes. Also, since there are no hotels or guest rooms in the villages, visitors most often sleep in sleeping bags on the floor of the school.

Mentoring is one of 15 *Effective Strategies* advocated by the National Dropout Prevention Center to help solve the dropout problem in our schools, as well as help promote peer support, social competence, self-determination, and leadership skills. The rural Yup'ik Eskimo villages in the Lower Kuskokwim School District (LKSD) have been particularly vulnerable to high school dropout and the resulting negative effects that include high incidences of truancy, teen



Yup'ik Dancers from Kuspuq



Kasigluk Village



High School Mentors During Summer Training

pregnancy, drug use/abuse, and suicide. Obviously, due to the time and distance issues between the remote villages, face-to-face mentoring and peer support is problematic. Using a computer-mediated process to communicate with one another eliminates the time and distance barrier.

Interestingly, the most prolific outcomes have occurred among the high school mentors as opposed to the elementary and middle school mentees. It should be noted that the majority of mentors selected for the program were high-risk students themselves. Not one of the high school students engaged as a mentor has dropped out of school since the program's implementation two years ago. Other indicators of success have been increased attendance and academic scores, and a dramatic decrease in office discipline referrals.

Future project plans include a possible E-mentoring project between the LKSD high school mentors and the men's and women's basketball teams at Clemson. Basketball is a tremendously popular activity and sport in rural Alaska. It is an activity that can be enjoyed year-round, and one in which Alaska Native students have demonstrated a propensity to not only enjoy, but one in which they try hard to excel.

Why Clemson basketball? First of all, a mentoring commitment by student athletes honors the land-grant philosophy, i.e. 'service to society,' from which Clemson University was founded. Second, the location of the NDPC at Clemson and its continuing work in the Lower Kuskokwim School District position it to be a perfect coordinator for the project. Third, the men's



Traveling to the Villages by Boat



Traveling to the Villages by Airplane and Snowmachine

basketball team has a very high national profile and has periodically played in the Great Alaska Shootout thereby creating significant 'name recognition' and respect for rural Alaska Native students. Fourth, the Clemson Athletic Department has very high expectations for players to be good role models, both on the court and off. This will be a wonderful opportunity for the players to make a positive impact on young men and women who might not otherwise have the opportunity to interact with such high profile role models.

This is but one of three major projects the National Dropout Prevention Center is involved with in Alaska to help reduce the dropout rate among Alaska Natives. Moreover, for over two decades, the NDPC has been involved in a myriad of projects around the nation and internationally to address school dropout and disaffection. It is the only organization in the nation that is focused solely on dropout prevention. For more information regarding the work of the Center, log onto www.dropoutprevention.org.